

Bessie Coleman, Pilot



I refused to take no for an answer.

Bessie Coleman often said, "I refused to take no for an answer." Not only did she say this, she acted upon it. Throughout her short life, she continually went after what she wanted in spite of obstacles that stood in her way.

Bessie Coleman was born in 1892. She lived with her parents and 12 siblings in Texas. The family was poor and life was hard. The entire family worked to pick cotton when it was harvesting time. This was a difficult job and Bessie did not enjoy it.

Bessie loved going to school. She had to walk four miles to a one-room schoolhouse for Black students. Sometimes the school ran out of pencils and papers, but Bessie was determined to learn. When a library wagon came to her house, she would rent books. Her favorite books were about Harriet Tubman. They inspired her. Bessie wanted to be daring just like Harriet.

After Bessie graduated from high school, she went to college. Unfortunately, she was only able to go for a semester before her money ran out, so she decided to move to Chicago. She hoped that there would be more opportunities there.

Bessie started working as a manicurist, a person who does nails. One day her brother came to her work and started to tease her. He had been a soldier in France during World War I. He told her that the French women were better than American women. In fact, they even flew planes!

Bessie thought about this. Flying planes sounded both daring and fun. This is what she wanted to do with her life. So she started looking for a pilot to teach her to fly. Pilot after pilot told her no. Some said no because Bessie was a woman. Others said no because Bessie was Black. Bessie was beginning to feel discouraged. How could her dream of becoming a pilot come true if no one was willing to teach her?

Finally, her friend Robert Abbott suggested that she go to France and learn to fly. He knew that there were pilots who would train her. It would not matter to them that she was a Black woman. So Bessie began saving money to go to France. She got a better paying job running a chili shop. She asked friends for donations. She took French so that she could understand her teachers. Finally, Bessie had enough money to go to France.

In June of 1921, Bessie's dream of becoming a pilot came true. She became the first American Black woman pilot. When she returned to the United States, she performed in air shows where she did tricks and parachuted from her plane. She wanted to inspire others to fly.

Bessie also had another dream. She wanted to open her own flight school. In 1923 she bought her first plane so she could start giving lessons to her students. Unfortunately, the plane crashed and Bessie broke her leg and several ribs. It would take her two years to recover and fly again. Worse, her plane was destroyed.

She still had her dream of opening a flight school. But she needed to earn money to buy a new plane. Once Bessie recovered from her injuries, she began participating in air shows. She also earned money speaking to groups.

Finally, in April of 1926 she was able to purchase a plane. On April 30, 1926, she and her co-pilot decided to take a practice flight for a show on May 1, 1926. Unfortunately, something went wrong with the plane and it crashed, killing both Bessie and her co-pilot.

Bessie was just 34 years old when she died. But she made a lasting impact on others. She inspired people to follow their dreams by not taking no as an answer.

Name: _____

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1. What would have happened if Bessie Coleman had not followed her statement, “I refused to take no as an answer”?

2. What detail from the story supports the fact that Bessie Coleman was a brave person?

3. What is a detail from the story supports the fact that Bessie Coleman was determined to achieve her dreams?

4. What impact did Bessie Coleman have on society (then *and* now)?
